

## FORSCHUNGSHILFE

Research Tips and Techniques for Finding Your German-Speaking Ancestor

By L. T. Ostwald, 600 Juniper Av., Boulder CO 80304, 303-443-9466

### NO. 7 - IDENTIFYING AND INTERPRETING NAMES FOUND IN CHURCH RECORDS

When beginning the search through a microfilmed church record, the first goal should be to determine (or confirm) whether the family name(s) occurs in the church record at all. Recognition of even single names may seem difficult, yet with some perseverance, even those with limited knowledge of the German language can do so.

In preparation, you will have practiced writing your surnames of interest, place-names and abbreviations of the surrounding villages, and key words from a German word list until their appearance and meaning are committed to memory. Also it helps to have at hand a table illustrating typical styles of script writing, such as those given in the references below.

On your initial search (backwards!) through the records, avoid getting bogged down extracting or trying to interpret complete entries. Make a simple index of the entries where the sought-for surname occurs, using the page number, entry number (if any), or date of the event. You are certain to want to return to previously examined entries.

Checking the tabulated lists of communicants, if they are recorded, the death records, and the lists of sponsors may make a quick surname survey. These entries are simple in format and the names easily identified.

Study the format of the church book entries. No two scribes used the exact same format, but each was likely to repeat their style on successive entries.

Entries made after about 1820, were usually recorded in columns printed or drawn with pen, with heading labels at the top. Start your search in this type of record, even though the ancestor you seek may have been born much earlier when text (narrative) entries were used. Also, during this time era, the surnames are likely to be written in familiar Latin script, and they also may be underlined, making them easily recognized.

Typical column headings for birth records may be: place, name of the child, name and occupation of the father, name of mother, whether the child is legitimate, birth date, christening date, and sponsors. However, the columns may not be in this order, and the scribe may not follow exactly the prescription of the headings.

When you have gained some familiarity with surnames and place names, move to earlier records covering the years of interest, where the entries instead of columnar format are probably in text. Single columns to the left or right of the blocks of text, may contain one or more of the following: the date, place, pastors name, ordinal number of entry, first name or last name of the child. Compare successive entries and "crack the code" on the outside column(s) framing the narrative entry.

Look for a pattern in the text entry and find the most likely location for the surnames. Even in earlier records the surnames of the new child (baptismal record) or groom (marriage record), may be underlined or written in Latin script. Refer to the months of the year, written out numbers, and familiar Christian names in several different entries to become accustomed to the handwriting style of the scribe.

Here are some nuisances and pitfalls likely to be encountered when searching for and identifying family names:

1. The names, either given or surnames, may not be capitalized. Instead words such as verbs, adjectives, or written out numbers, not normally capitalized, may be capitalized.

2. Place-names and dates, may appear to be omitted, having been replaced by words indicating "the same as above": eiusdom or eadem (Latin), selbst, daselbst, desgleichen, obigen, ditto, etc. or for place-names, hiesigen or dahier to mean local. This alters the usual format.

## FORSCHUNGSHILFE

Research Tips and Techniques for Finding Your German-Speaking Ancestor

By L. T. Ostwald, 600 Juniper Av., Boulder CO 80304, 303-443-9466

### NO. 7 - IDENTIFYING AND INTERPRETING NAMES FOUND IN CHURCH RECORDS

3. The given name of the child may not be supplied, in which case it is reasonably safe to assume the child was named after the first named sponsor of the same sex as the child.

4. If the name of the father cannot be found the child was probably illegitimate (unehelich), although the parents may have eventually married, and the surname entered at a later date with a note to that effect.

5. The mother's name, in birth records, is usually, but not always, given. Sometimes the mother's first name will be given without her surname.

6. Most text (narrative) entries will be devoid of punctuation. Parenthetical phrases, not set off by commas, and the beginning and end of sentences will not be obvious. If the word order is convoluted, it may be difficult to associate the modifiers such as place names, occupations, and even first names, with the proper person in the record: In the phrase "Andreas Johann Christian Elbert Schafer's son" the names Johann and Christian could belong to either the father or the son.

Eventually you will begin to extract records and form family groups and relationships based on the names, dates and other identifiers. Other precautions must be taken.

7. People may have been called by one of their middle names instead of the first name. For instance a boy baptized Johann Andreas Christian Fessler, when married may be called Andreas Christian, and as a father even called Christian.

8. Sponsors were often aunts, uncles or grandparents, but also might be just popular and respected members of the parish, or perhaps happened to be sitting in the front pew and were asked to act as witnesses. Study the pattern of sponsor's names versus those of the parents in a variety of entries before concluding that the sponsors were close relatives

9. Given names went through phases of popularity and it is not unusual to find two people in the same village using identical names, married to wives using the same first name, with no last name given, and with both couples having children in the same time era.

If a microfilm copier is available, make copies of those records that seem important but are not straight forward, so that you may study them more intensely at home and possibly obtain some help with interpretation.

Besides the surname, (Gott sei dank), other equally important parts of the records help identify the participants:

- a. The occupations,
- b. Village of residence,
- c. Ages, as given in death records and sometimes in marriage records,
- d. The mother's name, and
- e. The pattern, and names of sponsors.

Interpretation and use of these identifiers to aid in establishing family relationships will be the subject of later newsletter articles.

#### REFERENCES

Jensen, Larry O., *Genealogical Handbook of German Research*, PO Box 441, Pleasant Grove UT 84062

Verdenhalven, Fritz, *Familienkundliches Wörterbuch*, Verlag Degener, Postfach 1340, D8530 Neustadt / Aisch, Germany

Smith, Kenneth L., *German Church Books: Beyond the Basics*, Picton Press, Camden ME 1989